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ABSTRACT

The National Education Goals Panel has not met its goal of having every adult American literate by the year 2000. There are many adults who "slipped through the cracks," and have only rudimentary reading and writing skills. The large number of foreign born residents who do not have the necessary reading and writing skills to communicate effectively in English, and those adults who do not posses the ability to use computer-operated equipment, illustrate the need for community colleges and other literacy organizations to continue to improve literacy efforts. While the National Adult Literacy Survey has defined literacy as being able to use "printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (U.S. Congress, 1993), literacy attainment usually includes having the necessary verbal and mathematical skills to be a fully functioning citizen. Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, also known as the Adult Education and Literacy Act, has made attempts to centralize funding efforts and hold local programs accountable for outcomes. In general, adult literacy programs often involve a number of organizations, community colleges, local education agencies, public and private non-profits, community-based organizations and correctional facilities. The Digest concludes that rather than competing, community colleges should collaborate with other agencies to combat illiteracy. (AF)

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Digest

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Community College Adult Literacy Programs Moving Toward Collaboration

by Gigi Gomez

In 1989, the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) created goals to help measure the educational progress of the United States. One of the goals addressed adult literacy: "By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (National Institute for Literacy, p.1). Unfortunately, there are few days left in 1999, and the many forms of illiteracy are still a long-standing social problem in America.

According to the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (U.S. Congress, 1993), about 21 percent of the adult population over the age of 16 had only rudimentary reading and writing skills. These include those who slipped through the cracks of formal education and did not learn the basic reading, writing, or math skills. Also, the foreign-born who come to work, study, and/or live in the U.S. do not have the necessary speaking or writing skills to communicate effectively in English. In addition, in an era of advanced technology, the common worker may be unqualified or unprepared to work with computer-operated equipment.

With these many forms of illiteracy plaguing the United States, community colleges and other literacy organizations continue to find innovative means and strategies to improve adult literacy. This digest will present several definitions of literacy, describe successful programs, and examine collaborative efforts between community colleges and other agencies to fortify adult literacy instruction.

What is Literacy?

The National Adult Literacy Survey has defined a literate person as one who uses "printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (U.S. Congress, 1993, pp. 3-4).

Functional literacy "refers to the application of those basic skills to one's social, community, and working environment" (*Literacy*, 1994, p. 9). The ability to learn, think critically, and make decisions, and to acquire family life, scientific and technological, and workplace skills are all important dimensions of literacy. Literacy means more than simply knowing how to read; it also means having the necessary mathematical and verbal skills to be a functional and productive citizen.

However, attaining literacy depends on each individual's goals and potential. The Office of Technological Assessment (OTA) states that "there is no absolute threshold of skill or competency above which people can be certified as literate and below which they can be said to have a literacy problem" (U.S. Congress, pp. 39). Some students would like to be able to read a bedtime story to their children. Others may want to be able to read directions on their prescription bottles, street signs, or menus. Perhaps students would like to learn new work skills that will advance their positions or careers. Being literate does not mean acquiring a fixed number of skills and knowledge at a certain point in time, but rather accumulating the necessary skills and knowledge to be functional in one's environment.

Literacy Programs

Adult literacy programs have been affected by the implementation of Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (1998), also known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. This legislation, an amendment of the Adult Education Act, attempts to centralize efforts and funding in order to hold local programs and the state and federal governments accountable to each other and the public. The three main objectives of this new act are:

1. To help adults become literate and gain the skills needed for employment and self-sufficiency,
2. To assist parents in obtaining skills in order to be active participants in their children's educational development, and
3. To help adults complete a secondary education (Workforce Investment Act of 1998).

Many of the already established literacy services can help to actualize these objectives. Adult Basic Education assists students whose skills are below the eighth-grade level. Students who are at the high school level and want to obtain a high school equivalency diploma, either by passing course work or attaining general education development (GED) certification, can enroll in Adult Secondary Education. English as a Second Language (ESL) programs help the non-English speaker who has limited English proficiency in reading, writing, or speaking. Family literacy services attempt to reinforce and enhance learning for both parents and children by having them read and learn together. There are also literacy programs designed for individuals with physical and/or learning disabilities and for individuals who are incarcerated. For those finding their job skills obsolete due to technology and globalization, workplace literacy helps current and potential employees learn occupational skills.

Moving toward Collaboration for the 21st Century

Collaboration in providing services can offer efficiency among the available adult literacy programs. Johnson and Hartman (1998) have found that adult liter-

acy services generally involve the following
organizations: local education agencies (60 percent), community colleges (15 percent), community-based organizations (14 percent), public and private non-profits (7 percent) and correctional facilities (4 percent). What would it take for these organizations to collaborate for the common good?

Irwin, Gordon, and Lindroth (1994) offer several principles for successful collaboration:

- "All literacy education providers must recognize that no one agency or educational design will successfully address all of the community's adult literacy needs;
- All providers must be convinced that the benefits of cooperation are greater than the cost of participation;
- Each organization must understand that the vested interest of all other members of the coalition are as valid as their own vested interest; and
- There must be agreement on how funding sources will be pursued and used" (p.2).

Irwin, Gordon, and Lindroth report that the Job Centers in Wisconsin effectively address adult literacy because they centralize and coordinate instruction, education, employment, and training services that are available through partnering organizations. For instance, the Job Centers recognize and take advantage of the fact that the Tech Colleges' strengths lie in teaching occupational and basic skills training through classroom and computer instruction. Thus, these Job Centers refer their students to the best-equipped and most appropriate organization in an efficient manner.

Another example of collaboration occurs at Del Mar College, Texas. The college has experienced a decline in certificates and degrees awarded because students need more remedial work. As a result, the time for degree completion has increased and graduation rates have decreased. In response to this problem, the college decided to contract with the Corpus Christi Literacy Council and the Corpus Christi/Nueces County Workforce Development Corporation to provide instruction for GED, ESL, and basic literacy skills. Through computer-assisted learning centers and classroom instruction, literacy for dropouts and at-risk students was enhanced (Flores, A., Snouffer, & Flores, J., p.20).

Collaborations between companies and community colleges have been successful as well. Peavey Electronics discovered that its employees' lack of necessary workplace skills slowed production. The company went to Meridian Community College (MCC) for assistance in upgrading its workers' skills. MCC agreed to collaborate, ensuring that the college and the company remained "viable and productive contributors to the local community and state" (Willis, 1994, p.32). Positive outcomes resulted from the training: Peavey had an increase in business productivity of 2.1 percent in overall quality, which was sizeable in terms of dollar amount; employee absenteeism and grievances decreased; and critical thinking was exhibited in employees' thoughtful suggestions on how to reduce costs and wastes.

Bishop (1993) states that program marketing can be done through college employees who are involved or associated with local organizations (i.e. churches, fraternal organizations, cultural organizations, and civic groups). This method has been productive for Carteret Community College, located in a rural community in which residents do not have access to television advertisements about its adult literacy programs. The recruitment of nonreaders into adult basic education or literacy programs is highly dependent on verbal, face-to-face communications initiated by the college's faculty and staff (Bishop, 1993). Four months after a meeting with local community leaders, the college witnessed a 9 percent enrollment increase in adult literacy programs.

Conclusion

Instead of competing against each other, community colleges and other community and business organizations can reposition themselves by pooling their strengths to combat illiteracy in adults. Although illiteracy will not be eradicated by the year 2000, as set forth by the National Education Goals Panel, collaboration can be an important step toward attaining nationwide adult literacy for the twenty-first century.

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